

AFSA and NSA Respond - HISTORY TODAY: October 11, 2018

FROM: Center for Cryptologic History (CCH)

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WARNING: This article quotes primary sources from the 1950s that used language and terminology many consider offensive today.

In an earlier History Today, readers learned about the 1950 congressional investigation led by Senator Clyde Hoey, which examined the employment of homosexuals in the federal government. How did NSA respond to these external forces? NSA's short-lived predecessor, the Armed Forces Security Agency (AFSA), was still working its way through growing pains, having only been established in 1949. Shortly after the Hoey Committee wrapped up its investigation, AFSA officials met with the Civil Service Commission (a predecessor to today's Office of Personnel Management) and decided that "suitability" would be a factor in determining derogatory information on pre-employment background checks. Prior to that, only political inclinations (e.g., communist inclinations) were a determining factor for derogatory information.

AFSA security officials initially determined that all existing employees, who had been hired prior to this change, would have to go through the same background checks as new applicants, in order to bring their clearance status up to date. This tightening of security practices ruffled the feathers of those who had joined the cryptologic organizations during World War II and who were not accustomed to the tighter regulations. It was also at this time that the use of the polygraph was under consideration as a tool to speed up background investigation processing, which was backlogged due to the increasing numbers of new hires. This, too, caused consternation among some of the more established personnel who worried that the polygraph's implementation would hurt the recruitment and retention of qualified employees that were so desperately needed.

By 1951, employee retention did become a problem at AFSA. Gertrude Kirtland, Chief of the Employee Utilization Branch within AFSA's personnel department, was asked to give an overview of the retention problem. In her opinion, the retention problem was the result of many disparate issues, which she discussed in detail, including that "there is a widespread stigma placed on Government employees . . ." that gave "the impression that Washington men all haunt Lafayette Park and wear perfume and that the women are easy marks." At the time, Lafayette Park in Washington, DC, was a well-known and increasingly publicized place where gay men frequented.

By the fall of 1952, employee complaints about the polygraph had increased so much that the Director of AFSA, Major General Ralph Canine, requested a survey of the Security Division's use of the polygraph and other security practices by a small ad hoc committee. In their wide-ranging November 1952 report, Frank Raven (Chief of the Technical Projects Group within the Office of Operations), Lawrence Shinn (Technical Director within the Special Processing Division of the Office of Operations), Howard Campaigne (Assistant Chief for Research), and R.H. Shaw (Head of the Crypto Security Branch) stated that,

" . . . excessively indiscreet heterosexual behavior or promiscuity can be as great a security risk as other sexual behavior factors now considered. It is desirable for the

Security Control Division to consider the incorporation of this as a factor to be searched.”

Accompanying the report to the director, the Chief of the Security Control Division, COL Leslie H. Wyman, USA, disagreed with the committee’s recommendation and instead stated that,

“ . . . questions concerning homosexuality are developed during the blackmail phase of the interview but liability to blackmail is not what constitutes the security risk here – rather, it is the evidence of poor and weak character and of the certainty of alliances with others of similar ilk, associations which breed security risks. On the other hand, heterosexual behavior or promiscuity, while unconventional, is certainly not unusual or unnatural.”

His rebuttal to the committee continued,

“ . . . in homosexual cases only, which constitute grounds for termination under ‘unsuitability for government employment’, the Chief, Personnel Security Branch, deals directly with CID [possibly, Criminal Investigations Division] and with the Chief, CIVPERS [Civilian Personnel] to accomplish termination at once, but not as a security risk – only as an undesirable employee.”

At this point, AFSA had morphed into the National Security Agency by an executive order issued by outgoing President Truman. Elected under a campaign slogan of “Let’s Clean House,” President Dwight D. Eisenhower promised to clean up a multitude of issues in bureaucratic Washington. One of his first problems to tackle was the lackadaisical security requirements for federal employment and security clearances. Four months into his presidency in 1953, Eisenhower issued Executive Order (E.O.) 10450 “Security Requirements for Government Employment.” The order stated that all persons employed by the government “shall be reliable, trustworthy, of good conduct and character, and of complete and unswerving loyalty to the United States.” It also outlined the specific characteristics and behaviors that could prevent someone from obtaining federal employment including, for the first time, “sexual perversion.” This phrase, and others similar to it, would appear in future records as a tacit code word for homosexuality.

In August 1953, the NSA Security Control Division instituted a Security Educational Program with a goal of raising “security consciousness in all personnel until it became a comparative sixth sense.” Less than a year old at this point, NSA realized the multitude of security challenges it was facing: physical security, personnel security, industrial security, and information security. In addition to the educational program, a new element within the Security Control Division was established called the Special Research Unit (SRU). This unit was charged with, “investigation of all breaches of security.” The unit began diligently reporting on monthly numbers of security violations by category. In one of its early reports, “category III” violations were identified as “perversion” cases. At some point, an unknown official scratched out “perversion” on this report and wrote “subversion” in its place. From thereafter, category III violations – of which constituted the highest numbers in almost every month – were discreetly referred to as “subversion” cases. In December 1953, the number of “subversion” cases being worked by the SRU increased from 21 to 114 and accounted for 60 percent of all pending cases.

In October 1954, a pivotal moment in the young agency's history occurred. Joseph Sidney Petersen, an employee who had worked in cryptology for 13 years, was arrested by the FBI for passing classified documents to a former Dutch colleague and other Dutch associates (look for a History Today article about Petersen later this month). Although the Petersen case would result in a conviction, as he had indeed broken the law, NSA officials would never be able to agree upon the motive that had led him to betray his country. However, one fact is clear. NSA Security officials were initially tipped off to Petersen

as a result of a perversion case in the U.S. Navy. Petersen had not been in the Navy but was outed by an officer whom he had met. This was brought to the attention of NSA Security, which began an investigation that eventually uncovered Petersen's entanglement with the Dutch. Even though NSA Security did not believe Petersen was a communist (in fact he ardently opposed it) and could not pin down a motive, his case was used as an example of the linkage between homosexuality and security risk. The significance of this fact is noted in the words of the Chief of Security to DIRNSA in January 1955, "I indicated that it is apparent that the Petersen case will be used by the Administration to justify the value of the E.O. 10450 program."

By August 1955, the Security Control Division's implementation of E.O. 10450 was in full swing. Security developed relationships and procedures with sister intelligence agencies and local law enforcement to assist with background checks and alerts of arrests or misconduct charges pertaining to NSA employees. This was a recommendation by the 1950 Hoey Committee - that intelligence agencies and local law enforcement work closely together and cross reference their files. The Security Control Division also compiled a proposed speech that could be used by security officials to brief local law enforcement groups, in particular the U.S. Park Police. The talking points provided an overview of the clearance process: the Personal History Statement (PHS); the voluntary polygraph examination to verify the PHS; the National Agency Check of records held by the FBI, the Civil Service Commission, and the HUAC; and the full Background Check conducted by NSA Security to weigh against criteria outlined in E.O. 10450. The talking points also included the following statements,

"In recent years there has been a growing emphasis placed upon what we refer to as suitability for employment by sensitive agencies with the Government. In simple terms we consider the pervert, the homosexual, the alcoholic, the dope addict, the habitual gambler or anyone guilty of notoriously disgraceful conduct or poor moral character to be a security risk"

"We are as eager about the preventative approach to security as we are about the detective approach . . . we want to know who the homosexual partners have been for our employees who adhere to the third sex . . . Answers to these questions give us an awful lot of blind alleys - but they gave us the case of Joseph Sidney Petersen who is now serving seven years in a Federal penitentiary for espionage. It was just through the analysis of such relatively minor suitability data that we were able to bring to the surface one of the most damaging spy cases in the history of our Government . . . We're

Legend.

II	Misconduct	
III	Perversion	Subversion
IIIV	Espionage	
V	Sabotage	
VI	Phys Sec Violations	
VII	Pers Sec Violations	
VIII	Special Inquiry	

Bottom portion of the December 1953 Report of NSA's Special Research Unit (SRU) showing the category of "perversion" being replaced by the word "subversion."
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now operating our security program at NSA on the assumption that there are more Petersens yet to be found . . . I think you'll agree that its common sense that when an avenue of approach proves to be as fruitful as did the one used in the Petersen case, it should be expanded and every effort made to exploit it more fully."

The Agency eventually established an internal Loyalty-Security Board made up of high-ranking NSA officials to adjudicate individual subversion cases and consider if they should be nominated to the U.S. Communications Intelligence Board for a security waiver, which could be granted in extenuating circumstances. More research on this aspect of the policy may help shed light on why and how some members of the LGBT community may have been allowed to work during the decades that followed, while others were not.

In time, this security requirement for federal employment that was born in the late 1940s and early 1950s would give way. The fear that developed post-World War II and triggered congressional and executive branch actions would eventually fade, as societal norms changed and the public became increasingly concerned with civil rights. Nevertheless, executive agencies were compelled to follow the directives of national leadership. While the blackmail rationale would linger in whispered hallway gossip for decades, it is important to remember that implementation of E.O. 10450 was rooted in widespread phobias at the time: from communism and espionage to homosexuality and a changing definition of traditional American values. In the middle of this nationwide Lavender Scare, the National Security Agency was coming of age while trying to hire the best and the brightest to tackle our Nation's toughest problems. There is no doubt that members of the LGBT community quietly contributed to the mission both during and after World War II, but we will probably never know the full extent.

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